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## Columbus hilltop being cleared of abandoned tires

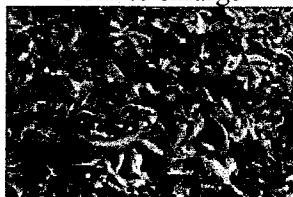
By **LINDA HALSTEAD-ACHARYA**  
Of The Gazette Staff

What weighs 100,000 pounds, runs by remote control and spits out black rubber chunks the size of a forearm?

The first-of-its-kind tire shredder perched on a hilltop just east of Columbus has been chewing up tires for the past few days, making a noticeable dent in the several hundred thousand tires amassed there. By the end of May, it's hoped that all of the tires will have been munched up, hauled off and buried in a draw east of Silesia.

"This is the first machine of its type," said Kurt Wieringa, who is overseeing the project for Envirocon, the Missoula-based company in charge of the cleanup.

The shredder, hot off the manufacturing floor, is similar to machines being used to chop up wood debris and even appliances in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The basic technology is nothing new, Wieringa said, but the shredder is unique because it's built on tracks that allow it to move from tire pile to tire pile.

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As a backhoe operator feeds the shredder's hopper "jawfalls" of tires, the shredder's counter-rotating blades take the tires -- even tires with steel belts -- and rips them into pieces. The remnants left behind range in size from half a tire to the palm of your hand.

"The reason for shredding is simply to reduce the volume for efficiency in trucking and landfill space," Wieringa said.

The \$900,000 piece of equipment, leased by Envirocon for \$525 an hour, can chew its way through 15,000 to 20,000 tires a day, he said.

Depending on the number of tires onsite -- estimates range from 250,000 to 400,000 -- the shredding should be done in the next few weeks.

"There is a lot of water in these tires," he said. "Hopefully we'll finish up before the mosquito season."

### From dream to disaster

How the tires came to be on the hilltop goes back to the early 1990s, when former Columbus resident Michael "Mitch" Mitchell (not the Mike Mitchell currently residing in Columbus) envisioned using them for a tire-recycling business. By 1995, he had gathered what many estimated at 250,000 tires. But his scheme went bust, and he quit paying licensing fees, abandoned the site and left the area. Eventually, he was charged with nearly \$500,000 in civil penalties that remain unpaid.

Ten years passed before the Department of Environmental Quality was awarded \$300,000 to clean up the site. Before the project was a go, however, the tires caught fire last summer in a suspected arson fire. It's estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 tires burned before the melted black goo was smothered with dirt.

Now, finally, the shredder is going full tilt to clean up what has long been considered a disaster waiting to



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### What to do with scrap tires?

- On average, every person generates roughly one used tire per year.

- At the end of 2003, the U.S. generated approximately 290 million scrap tires.

- Markets now exist for roughly 80 percent of scrap tires, up from 17 percent in 1990. More than 44 percent were used as fuel, another 56 percent were recycled for civil engineering projects; 8 percent were converted into ground rubber and recycled products.

- In 2003, about 27 million scrap tires -- 9.3 percent -- were disposed of in landfills or monofills.

- Tires are banned from landfills in 38 states, but

STATE BECAME  
AWARE THAT 50%  
OF TIRES WERE  
ILLEGALLY DUMPED ON  
"STATE LAND"  
FIRE IN  
SUMMER OF '05

happen. Besides providing a potential breeding ground for pests and vermin, the DEQ estimated the cost of extinguishing a full-blown fire could hit \$1 million -- not to mention create toxic runoff and a toxic cloud.

"A lot of local residents are just happy to see something done," Wieringa said. "But it's sad that we (taxpayers) are paying for it."

### Half a million short?

When all is said and done, the cost of the cleanup may well exceed \$300,000.

Envirocon won the contract, bidding \$80 a ton to remove the tires from the knob.

"We're anticipating it could come in as high as \$800,000," said Daryl Stankey, who is heading up the project for the DEQ. "But we're hoping it will be less."

The contract set a cap at \$1 million, with the difference to be made up from junk vehicle funds, he said.

Mike McClurg of Billings says that's way too high. McClurg was working with Ron King of Colorado, who also bid the project. King has his own shredder and figured he could meet the proposal for \$350,000 or less -- and he planned to recycle, not bury, the scrapped tires. King bid the project at \$100 a ton, but he estimates the number of tires onsite comes closer to 4,000 tons.

Stankey said the bid was awarded based on a per-ton basis. As for the tonnage, he said, "Mr. King has his estimate of what he thinks is there as opposed to what our estimate is."

By the time the hilltop is cleared of tires, that question will be resolved. Each truckload is weighed on a certified scale as it leaves the site.

### From hilltop to hillside

Each day, 12 to 15 semitrailers loaded with chunks of black rubber make the 80-mile round trip from the hilltop near Columbus to another hilltop east of Silesia.

For the past dozen years, Jay Craig, owner of TFR (Tires for Reclamation), has been filling a basin near the top of a hill with cast-off tires. He got the idea when one of his cattle fell into a draw and died.

"I made the statement then that 'All that thing (draw) is good for is a dump'," he laughed. Not long after that incident, he was at a tire shop when it occurred to him there was a need for dealing with waste tires. It took him a

eight states -- including Montana -- have no restrictions on placing scrap tires in landfills.

- In 1994, the estimated number of scrap tires in stockpiles in the U.S. was 700 to 800 million. Ten years later, due to aggressive cleanup programs, it was estimated the number was down to 275 million.

- Scrap tires were commonly recycled until the 1960s, when cheap foreign oil and difficulty shredding steel-belted tires shifted the short-term economic benefits to disposal.

#### Sources:

Environmental Protection Agency Web site on scrap tires; Rubber Manufacturers Association, 2003; and Ohio's Division of Recycling and Litter Prevention Web site

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ACTUAL COST  
OF CLEAN-UP  
\$720,000

8200 TONS  
WERE REMOVED

year to get the necessary permit from the DEQ and he's been filling the draw ever since. It's turned out to be more lucrative than ranching.

"Our resource is the dirt. The air space and the dirt," he said. "We can cover it up and it won't be a problem."

TFR is one of only three or four such sites in the state and the only one in south-central Montana. According to Craig, the junk tires from about two-thirds of the shops in the Billings and Laurel areas end up in his draw.

"About the only competition I have is the city landfill," he said. "And (tires are) a nuisance for them."

The garbage at the city landfill creates methane gas, which gets trapped in the tires and causes them to work back to the surface. Since Craig's "monofill" is restricted to tires, he doesn't have that problem.

The TFR site is tidy, with only a few piles of tires and shredded tires in view. As new tires and pieces come in, Craig routinely covers them with several feet of packed dirt.

"You have to stay ahead of the program so you don't end up with a monster you can't control," he said. When the fill is done, it will be planted back to grass.

Craig figures the tires from Columbus, if they'd been left whole, would have filled up the permitted space that he has left. But shredded, the volume is reduced by about 70 percent, leaving him several more years before he reaches that limit.

People have asked Craig about the impact of his buried tires 1,000 years into the future.

"I tell them we've only had tires 75 to 80 years," he said. "Who knows? I wish I had that crystal ball."

### Why not recycle?

Nobody disputes the benefit of recycling spent tires. Rubber ground up into crumb-sized pieces is used for landscape mulch, playground bedding and even for cushioning under athletic fields. Recycled tires have also been used for highways and fuel.

But, according to Wieringa and Craig, recycling tires in Montana is not yet economically feasible. Profitable recycling efforts require more tires than the state produces. Hauling tires to recycling facilities out of state costs too much and hauling tires back into the state to come up with enough doesn't make sense.

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Craig thinks one day the cost of fuels will reach a point that his buried tires will be unearthed.

"I believe that when the day comes that it's economically feasible, they'll come back and recycle these tires," he said. "But it'll probably not be in my lifetime."

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